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By-Ford, Nick Aaron

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Racism, the ways in which it is manifested in higher education, and the effectiveness of its manifestations are discussed. The following proposals suggesting how English departments can contribute to the diminution of racism were made: (1) that single academic standards be required for black and white students in freshman English classes, (2) that works by black authors be included in freshman English courses, (3) that black authors be added to the reading list in all American literature of drama courses, (4) that a reasonable number of the faculty do special studies of black literature, and (5) that at least one member of the English faculty be black. (CW)

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THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AND THE CHALLENGE OF RACISM

By Nick Aaron Ford, Morgan State College*

Fellow Chairmen: I have chosen to discuss with you a subject which I believe is not only crucial to the survival of the departments we represent, but to the survival of the entire educational establishment in these United States. I shall be concerned with four major questions: 1) What is racism? 2) In what ways does it manifest itself? 3) How extensive and effective are its manifestations? 4) How can English departments best contribute to its diminution?

The American College Dictionary defines racism as follows:

> 1. a belief that human races have distinctive make-ups that determine their respective cultures, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to rule others. 2. a policy of supporting such asserted right. 3. a system of government and society based upon it.

My own definition, which I use as the basis of my discussion in this paper, is that racism is the belief that race is the measure of the man, that some races are innately inferior, that no amount of talent, learning, or experience can erase the taint of inferiority from an individual belonging to such a race, and that organized society is obligated, overtly or covertly, to maintain fitting barriers of separation between the so-called inferior and superior races. My definition, as you can see, applies to both the white and black variety, the latter being of comparatively recent origin generated by the excesses of the former.

But a more simple statement of what white racism implies can be found in a White Citizens Council pamphlet now being used as a study manual in American history classes in several Florida High Schools: "God wanted the white people to live alone. And he wanted colored people to live alone. God has made us different. And God knows best."[1]

So much for the definition of racism. What evidence do we have that racism has been and still is the dominant philosophy of American society, as charged by the President's Commission on Civil Disorders? First, it is manifested in the gigantic slum ghettos which have spawned in all of our large cities because the American majority refuses to share decent uncrowded living accommodations with black neighbors. Second, it is manifested in the unequal justice that is meted out by the courts, especially in Southern communities, when jurors will refuse to convict white criminals for crimes against Negroes, even capital offenses. There is no wonder that Negroes are suspicious of politicians who base their campaigns for election to public office on the issue of "law and order," when everyone knows that violations of the Negro's legal rights by white lawbreakers have been condoned in almost every community in this nation from the beginning of nationhood to the present. Third, it is manifested in the employment practices of industry, where even now many black applicants with satisfactory qualifications are denied jobs simply because they are black. Finally, and this is the most pertinent to this audience, racism is manifested in the educational establishment of this nation from kindergarten through university, both in the hiring and promotion of faculty as well as in the treatment of students in educational programs.

In 1941 the Julius Rosenwald Fund subsidized the appointment to the University of Chicago faculty of Allison Davis, a sociologist and anthropologist, as the first Negro faculty

* A speech delivered to the ADE at NCTE in Milwaukee on 29 November 1968.

[1] Martin Waldron, The New York Times (September 29, 1968), p. 48.

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member on record to serve with full status in a Northern university. Six years later Fred G. Wale, director of the Fund, conducted a two-year survey of 600 Northern colleges and universities to determine the extent of faculty desegregation. Forty-three of the 179 respondents reported a combined total of 78 Negro faculty members. Such progress, from one to 78, within a six-year period seemed to be a hopeful trend, since at that time there were only 3,550 Negroes in the U.S. with Masters or Ph.D. degrees. But 20 years later, in 1967, when A. Gilbert Bell, a graduate student at Vanderbilt University, surveyed the same 179 institutions to ascertain the current situation concerning faculty desegregation, only 130 replied, claiming from one to 208 members, for a total of 785, although the one claiming 208 identified them only as "professional staff." Fifty-one institutions, approximately 40%, reported no Negro members despite the fact that there are now more than 200,000 black Americans whose educational background includes five or more years of college training.

May 15, 1968, when 125 Negro students, out of a total undergraduate enrollment of 6,400, signed an agreement with Northwestern University officials to end their 38-hour encampment in a business office building on the campus, they demanded as the price of their capitulation that the university administration issue an immediate statement, which was promptly done, acknowledging that Northwestern has "had in common with the white community in America, in greater or lesser degree, the racist attitudes that have prevailed historically in this society and which constitute the most important problem of our time." Two other student demands accepted by the University were the establishment of a separate dormitory for black students and a black student union, both of which are obvious manifestations of black racism.

There are many other ways in which black racism has been manifested in America. One important avenue is the religious movement of the Black Muslims who have made black nationalism popular. They have made "<u>black</u> the ideal, the ultimate value."

They have characterized all white people as human beasts: serpents, dragons, devils. They have made separatism their goal: a separate state or nation within the U.S. Their most famous convert, Cassius Clay, recently said that his 4-month-old daughter will be taught that the white man is a devil and that she must never consider integration.

How extensive and effective are the manifestations of racism?

Raymond W. Mack, professor of Education at Northwestern University and editor of the <u>American Sociologist</u>, has disclosed that in a recent scientific survey of 60,000 teachers and more than a half million pupils in 6,000 schools he found no evidence to support the conclusion that most black Americans subscribe to separatism and prefer black schools for black children. On the contrary, he insists, the views of most Negro parents in every community studied paralled the opinion expressed by a Negro minister in Savannah, Georgia:

> If our students are going to qualify for jobs that are opening up to them, it is essential that they get the best education, and the best happens to be 'white' right now.

In corroboration of Professor Mack's findings a poll of racial attitudes taken in 1967 by William Brink and Louis Harris revealed that only 11% of Negroes favored separatism, while one conducted by <u>Fortune</u> magazine in 1968 indicated that only 5% of the Negroes interviewed preferred separatism to integration.

Whatever the present percentage may be of black racists, there is growing evidence that this percentage is increasing with frightening rapidity. If it continues without interruption, it appears certain that within an incredibly short time the portentous prophesy of the Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders of two Americas, one white and the other black, will become a reality.

Strangely enough black and white racism advocate the same goals, but for different reasons. Black racism is simply a counter-reaction to white racism and would never have developed except for the stupid excesses of the white variety. By fighting savagely for fourteen years against every effort to make integration a fact as well as a legal statute, white racists convinced blacks that they would never be accepted on equal terms by white society. Consequently, many blacks have decided no longer to beg the whites to let them share equally a culture that has been developed by the contributions of both, but to reject every aspect of so-called middle class culture which the whites claim as their own and to glorify everyting that distinguishes black from white--the black skin, the bushy, kinky hair, and the exaggerated dialectal jargon invented especially to confuse and exasperate the whites.

According to the report of the President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, white racism is responsible for the current Black Revolution and the terrifying riots it engendered. Although there can be no justification for the appalling violence that has characterized this revolution, there are logical explanations which no fair-minded person can ignore. Before entering the final phase of my discussion, permit me to explore one explanation of black violence.

In an article entitled "A Moral Equivalent for Riots," Saturday Review (May 11, 1968), Harvey Wheeler, Fellow at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and co-author of Fail Safe, presents a significant discussion on the causes of and remedies for various kinds of violence based on a survey he made in this country and abroad under the auspices of the Ford Foundation. I disagree with many of his conclusions relating to remedies for violence by blacks, but I support the following analysis:

> Violence must be looked at in terms of the violation of the dignity of human beings. In those terms violence is merely the sporadic counter-response when one's humanity and one's dignity have been violated. A culture in which human relationships are characterized by a great deal of violence will therefore produce a great deal of violence. (p. 20)

Of course, those of you who teach American literature and have indulged in the luxury of reading such non-required American novelists as Richard Wright will remember that Wright espoused this thesis 28 years ago when in Native Son he had lawyer Max, defending young Bigger Thomas in his trial for murder, declare:

> The central fact to be understood here is not who wronged this boy, but what kind of a vision of the world did he have before his eyes, and where did he get such a vision to make him, without premeditation, snatch the life of another person so quickly and instinctively that even though there was an element of accident in it, he was willing after the crime to say: 'Yes; I did it. I had to'. . . .
>
> Multiply Bigger Thomas twelve million times, allowing for environmental and temperamental variations, and for those Negroes who are completely under the influence of the church, and you have the psychology of the Negro people. But once you see them as a whole, once your eyes leave the individual and encompass the mass, a new quality comes into the picture. Taken collectively, they constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive within this nation, devoid of political, social economic, and property rights.
>
> Your honor, remember that men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from lack of bread! And they can murder for it too.

If my argument has fulfilled its purpose so far, which was to convince you of the

necessity for urgent but wise action on many fronts to prevent the impending crisis of national destruction by the implosion of racism, you are now ready to explore with me constructive ways by which English departments can meet the challenge. Of all academic departments of a college or university, I believe the English department has greater opportunities and responsibilities to meet constructively and effectively the challenge of racism.

First, its responsibility in the area of language and rhetoric is crucial. In 95% of the colleges and universities every freshman must take some kind of course in Freshman English. Most often the course consists of reading and writing with a heavy emphasis upon usage and rhetoric. In such courses it is the duty of the teacher to assist the student to become proficient in the use of standard English. Since most black students have had less incentive than their white classmates to master standard English, the attitude that the teacher takes toward these students' mastery of standard English can be a decisive influence. In this area the voice of the arrogant black racist who proudly insists that black substandard dialect is superior to standard English because it is more colorful and uninhibited, as well as the well-meaning professional linguist who asserts that one dialect is as good as another, must be rejected. Although both apologists may be correct, the simple fact is, as the linguist readily admits, language is a social instrument. But in the case of the black speaker or writer it is also a political and economic instrument. And if the black job applicant wishes to compete on a nearly equal basis with the white applicant he had better be able to use standard English as well as his competitor.

In a recent issue of Saturday Review a black professor at a well-known white college ridiculed black professors at black colleges for teaching their students middle class American values: linguistic, economic, and cultural. He quotes with complete approval a statement from two Harvard sociologists, Professors David Riessman and Christopher Jencks, condemning black professors as "purveyors of super-American, ultra bourgeois prejudices and aspirations" instead of trying to promote a distinctive set of habits and values in their black students that will encourage them "to preserve a separate sub-culture." He adds scornfully, "Students are cajoled (by black professors) to lose their 'flat talk' and 'brogue' and learn to 'talk proper' (that is, like whites)." The fact is, however, if this black writer had not learned to write and talk "proper" (that is, like whites), he would never have been offered his present job as director of the Black Studies Curriculum at the reputable white college where he now works. Although Stokeley Carmichael, Rap Brown, and LeRoi Jones peddle this dialectal nonsense, in their own speech and writing they use impeccable standard English.

In my own opinion culturally disadvantaged black students not only can learn to master standard English as a primary language but the majority wants to do so. I deny the doctrine of Dr. Frank Fiessman, professor of Educational Sociology at New York University, who says in an article in the Saturday Review, September 17, 1966:

> The key ground rule of the Dialect Game--for both teacher and teaching situation--is acceptance of the students' non-standard primary language. The instructor who makes clear to his pupils that their primary language is not something to be denied or suppressed, but is in fact a linguistic entree to that other language which, in more formal circumstances, can produce more effective results, is building firmly on positive ground.

I believe a teacher who is guided by this doctrine will not be building on positive grounds, but rather on sinking sand, on the sand of condescension and denial of the ability of the black student to master the predominant dialect of his native land, a dialect that he and more than fifteen generations of his forefathers have intimately lived with from birth. I believe it is the duty of the teacher to demand that black students discard their substandard dialect as the first step in the process of

discarding the ghetto and second class citizenship. To say that the Negro student believes the teacher who rejects his substandard dialect rejects him is nonsense, for the average Negro pupil, who certainly knows the meaning of picket lines and civil rights demonstrations, knows that his substandard dialect is a part of the substandard living conditions that he and his parents are trying so desperately to escape. In fact, he is more likely to believe that those who are satisfied to have him think of standard English as a second language may be expressing a subconscious satisfaction at having him remain a second-class citizen in a land where the user of standard English dispenses the rewards of job opportunities and social approval. In my opinion the best way to defuse the lethal bomb of black racism in this kind of situation is to demand a single academic standard for blacks and whites and to help the blacks to achieve it by compensatory assistance.

Secondly, in Freshman English courses which use supplementary readers or independent literary works as major materials for the course, I recommend that selections by and about Negroes be required. Last year while visiting a well-known Ivy League university in a city with a large Negro population, I discovered that Freshman English teachers were given a list of sixty independent literary works covering the four major genres of poetry, fiction, drama, and essay from which twelve were to be selected as required readings for the particular teacher's individual course. I expressed my shock to the chairman of the course when I discovered that not one of the sixty was by or about American Negroes. For English departments to act as if black people either do not exist or their existence does not matter is to add legitimate fuel to the flames of racism aimed at the very foundations of our national survival. Surely one or more of the books of such distinguished black writers as Richard Wright, national book award winner Ralph Ellison, Pulitzer Prize winner Gwendolyn Brooks, and universally acclaimed prose stylist James Baldwin deserve a place among any sixty that are relevant to the lives of our students.

Thirdly, the English department must make all of its courses in American literature truly representative of our literary culture. The presentation of a survey course in American literature, a course in contemporary American literature, a course in the American novel, or a course in American drama which does not include significant black writers can no longer be tolerated. The complete omission of black writers, which is almost a universal practice in English departments, is a sign of white racism which must be eradicated. In the process of preparing this paper I carefully examined the contents of six college anthologies of American literature, edited and/or co-edited by thirteen of the most distinguished professors in the field, and was astounded by what I discovered.

Let me share with you these amazing findings. Anthology No.1, first published in 1934 and revised in 1947 and 1957, more widely used in colleges and universities than any other, includes in a two-volume edition the works of 93 authors covering 1,659 pages, with not one black writer. Anthology No.2, first published in 1956 and revised in 1957 and 1961, includes in a two-volume eidition the works of 80 authors covering 3,158 pages, with not one black writer. Anthology No.3, copyright 1961, one volume with the works of 58 authors covering 853 pages, with not one black writer. Anthology No.4, copyright 1961, one volume with the works of 84 authors covering 1,007 pages, with not one black writer. Anthology No.5, copyright 1961, one volume with the works of 99 authors covering 1,020 pages, with not one black writer. The most remarkable fact about this anthology is that it advertises the inclusion of 30 poets born between 1900 and 1920 and yet fails to include black Langston Hughes born in 1902 and black Pulitzer Prize winner Gwendolyn Brooks born within the period. Anthology No.6, first published in 1962 and revised in 1968, includes in a four-volume edition the works of 102 authors covering 2,562 pages, and not one black writer. This anthology has one volume devoted entirely to 50 writers of the Twentieth Century but fails even to mention such distinguished black writers as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin,

Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks. But what is most distressing is that the best educated guess I can make concerning the numerous other anthologies which I have not carefully analyzed is that at least 90% of them are guilty of the same omissions.

Now let me clearly state that I do not say the distinguished editors of these anthologies are racists, but I do say that either they are consciously or unconsciously actively supporting white racism, or are unwilling victims of it, or are not in truth the scholars they are reputed to be. Really I can not undersatnd how a professed specialist in American literature can honestly ignore all of the black contributors to this literature, although some of them have won high praise from the best of critics and even such honors as National Book Awards and Pulitzer Prizes. But it is not my purpose here to castigate individuals, which can be surmised by my refusal to call names, but it is rather to so shock the consciences of all fair-minded members of English departments that the current sanction of white racism by this sector of the profession will cease. Such a decision can be implemented by notifying publishers that you will no longer purchase textbooks for your department which do not fairly represent the literary contributions of all ethnic groups in the nation. If you think such an ultimatum is unrealistic, I can assure you that the superintendent of schools in my city of Baltimore did just that in a memorandum to all publishers last August. Another method of implementation is to supplement current inadequate texts by the use of separate anthologies of black writing, which are now in very short supply but which will be available in adequate quantity and quality by the fall of 1970.

Fourthly, English departments can further loosen the grip of racism in the area of higher education by immediately seeking to employ a reasonable number of faculty members willing to do special study in the area of black literature so that there will always be one or more teachers capable of assuming leadership in the integration of black literature into required courses and to offer specialized elective courses as the need arises. It is important that some of these recruits be black scholars, for they can offer good advice concerning delicate problems that may arise in the organization and instruction involved. But it is equally important that some who express interest in specializing in black literature be white, for it is both illogical and tacit acquiescence in the validity of racism to assume that only Negroes are capable of teaching black literature. For to accept such a premise as valid would require the acceptance also of its opposite: namely, only white scholars are capable of teaching Shakespeare, or Whitman, or Eliot.

I further recommend that departments which find it impossible to secure permanent or full-time black members, make strenuous efforts to secure visiting or part-time black professors to teach not only courses in black literature but other courses as well, so that white students will have an opportunity to learn by experience that there are Negroes capable of efficiently occupying such positions. I warn that you will have little success attempting to arrange teacher exchanges with predominantly black colleges, for there is hardly a black college in the country that does not already have a fair proportion of white teachers.

Finally, let me remind you of some good advice recently given by Jerry L. Walker of the College of Education of the University of Illinois:

> ...the study of English should give students greater insight into themselves and the world around them. To do that we will have to focus more of our study on today's culture, today's writers, today's literature, and today's youth.
>
> ...We cannot begin by deciding what was significant in the past and select writers and literature to prove that significance. Our

> curriculum will have to evolve day by day as conditions change. We will have to rely on our students to help us identify changes, and we will have to join them in the study of their significance.[3]

If you accept this advice you will not be alone. The eminent historian, Allan Nevins, recently said, "Yesterday, African history, shutting out the colored man and all his cultures, began with Livingstone, Stanley, Cecil Rhodes, and the great partitions; today, beginning with the arts of prehistoric peoples, it mentions explorers and European annexations as but tiresome, trivial interruptions."[4] According to an announcement some time ago, Harvard University began this fall to offer a new full-year course in "The Afro-American Experience" and is considering a degree-granting program in Afro-American studies. Parallel to the course the University sponsors a series of lectures by visiting scholars on the Afro-American Experience, required of students taking the course and open to others. The Johns Hopkins University of Baltimore, whose reputation for conservatism in educational content and method is world-wide, established a year ago an Institute of Southern History, including a study of the Negro's part in it, and is adding this year an assistant professorship in African History. At Yale University a student-faculty committee has proposed the creation of an undergraduate major in Afro-American studies.

If, as Professor Walker suggests, we seek student advice in helping to chart our department's course into new areas of genuine and significant relevance, we will find they are greatly disturbed by the present subjection of public institutions to the demands of racism. We will find them, both black and white, deeply alienated by the flagrant inequalities of a society dedicated to equality, and we will find in them a desperate impatience with the slowness of the academic community to atone for past sins and lost time. We will learn that they are sadly unimpressed by their brilliant professors "boldly reshaping the world outside the campus gates while neglecting to make corresponding changes in the world within."

Before it is too late let us heed the advice of Whitney Young, Jr., of the National Urban League, who said on the night of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination that feeling no ill will against non-whites is not enough; there must be concrete acts to rectify injustices which all of us, by inaction, have at least tacitly condoned. His warning was meant to imply that only in the measure that educated, privileged white Americans who thus far have remained largely "above the battle" replace indifference with active, purposeful, relevant participation in an all-out attack on the roots an branches of racism will there be any possible chance for the survival of America as a nation in which freedom and justice can live.

[3] English Journal (May 1966), p. 634.

[4] Saturday Review (April 6, 1968), p. 13.

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